

### Call to Worship

There is so much to learn from the world all around us. The seasons come and go. The earth is renewed. Hope is fulfilled. Faith is re-stored. **Seamlessly God's Word, God's World, God's Wisdom, is all connected. Let us learn from God, from the world, and from each other. Jesus walked among us long ago. Jesus is in our midst. Jesus is on the way!**

### The Word

Mark 13: 29-37 (NRSV)

"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. **Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.**

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware; keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. **Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.**"

### Living the Word

Now that we have Thanksgiving behind us, I know some of you are ready to begin singing Christmas Carols. There will be plenty of time for that, and though I like to follow the Liturgical Christian calendar, which says that Christmas is twelve days long, and doesn't begin until Dec 25, I will make exceptions as we get closer.

Today though, I want us to focus on Advent. Thus the hymns we sing today are to prepare us for Christmas. The first that we sang, "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" was written by Charles Wesley in 1744. Charles, as you might remember, was the brother to John Wesley, who is considered the founder of the Methodist Church. Though both were preachers, while John was out preaching across England, Charles mostly stayed home and wrote the words to over 7000 poems and songs.

*"Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee. Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart."*

The first verse focuses on the fact that the coming of Jesus Christ fulfilled Israel's longing for the Messiah. As the one who's coming was prophesied in the Old Testament, He is the "long-expected" one. Although He fulfilled Israel's prophecies, Jesus came to bring salvation to the entire world, which is what Wesley was referring to when he described Christ as the "hope of all the earth" and the "dear desire of every nation." More than that, He is the "joy of every longing heart."

*"Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a King, born to reign in us forever, now thy gracious kingdom bring. By thine own eternal spirit rule in all our hearts alone; by thine all sufficient merit, raise us to thy glorious throne."*

He alone is the one who can satisfy every soul. When Wesley wrote about Jesus' "all sufficient merit," he was referring to Christ's ability to bring us to salvation. Charles was writing about events that had happened centuries before, but had touched his heart with the knowledge of their importance for this day in the 1700s and for us today.

The Bible, a story book from beginning to end, is a reflection on humanity and a story of hope for our future. The trials of the Old Testament are tempered with the continued work of God in all of Creation. There is great hope for each generation. Though the words that are written in this book can all be dated before the end of the first century AD, the story continues to unfold each generation until today, with an eye on a story that goes forward into eternity.

Christ is a thread that is apparent all through the story. John starts his Gospel with *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."*

In the story, Christ is not physically present until the New Testament, but he is spoken of, predicted and planned for long before his human birth. The book of Isaiah was written 500 years before Jesus was born, but recorded these words: 7:14 *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."*

Zechariah also gave us some preview in 9:9 *"Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."* Doesn't that sound familiar to a certain Palm Sunday Story? Also, we find more of these type verses in the book of Psalms and Daniel, as they had insights and foresaw the coming of the Messiah as they looked forward in Hope.

Today we read from the book of Mark. He is recording what Jesus said, but doing it in a way that looks forward in Hope. All of these scriptures were written down in the midst of great oppression, when hope and a vision beyond the day was most needed. Jesus was looking even beyond our trials of today into eternity for us, with great hope. This story, His-Story (History) is for the benefit of all people from the time it was recorded to today and forever.

As Buzz Lightyear says in the movie Toy Story "To infinity and beyond" even though Buzz is just a plastic toy with some moving parts and a blinking light. Because of Buzz' vision beyond, he is able to do great things even as a toy. Movies like these give our children vision and teach them hope.

But after all of the turkey we consumed this weekend, we might want to just sleep through Advent and just jump to Christmas. After all, if we miss it this year, there will be another Advent again next year, won't there? After all, it has been happening since the birth of Jesus over 2000 years ago.

But today's scripture emphasizes "Keep Awake!" With the scriptures we cry out: Where are you God? When are you coming? Come now! Jesus reminds us that he will come again and we must be awake to the signs. Surely, Jesus won't come as a baby this time, or will he?

He mentions staying awake at evening, midnight, cockcrow, and dawn. These were the three-hour intervals recognized as the divisions of the night. In first century Jerusalem, most of the people slept at night as the only light would have been oil for the lamps, which they used only as needed. But Jesus really wants them and us to be more concerned with being alert than with knowing the day or hour.

So, we begin the story again: Today begins the Christian Year, which starts four weeks before Christmas, a time we call Advent. During the liturgical year we celebrate the birth, the life, the death and the resurrection of Christ. Then we have a long common time from Spring, until now where we break from the celebration and reflect on how Jesus fits into our everyday lives.

Last week was Christ the King Sunday, a pre-Advent reminder of who Christ became as a human, and then we come to Advent.

We have four weeks to anticipate the coming of Christ. Though we count down these days with Advent Calendars and Advent candles, to the promised day of Christmas and Jesus' birthday party, we don't have a date or hour for when Christ will come again. We are anticipating Christ's return, but are we waiting for Christmas or waiting for Christ? We follow a similar script each year waiting for Christmas, but waiting for Christ, we have no script to follow...Except the story itself.

In the story which begins in Genesis, we get hints and clues of one who will come. Listen to these familiar words from Isaiah 9:2,6 *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Again, these words were written hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, but speak of his greatness, to be anticipated. Our lives are pretty good here in Hayward Wisconsin, but if we take a look at the world as a whole, all of humanity, we know that there is some very great darkness. Christ overcame it once and will come again to conquer with peace and justice.

Isaiah 11:1-2 *A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*

It was very important to the people of Jesus age to know that he came from 'good stock' on his family tree. If you want a challenge in Hebrew names, you can turn to the first chapter of Matthew and read the lineage of Christ.

Isaiah 25:7-8 *And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away*

*the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.*

When Jesus came the first time, he told the followers about how they, and we, can overcome the fear of death, through the promise of a life beyond this one. He spoke of not living in sadness, as we will see our loved ones again someday, when he comes again.

*Isaiah 40:3 A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

Jesus' cousin John, the wilderness prophet came to prepare the people the last time. We must be alert, not for the false prophets, but for the ones who will prepare the way this time. That is what Advent is all about: preparing the way for Christ to come again.

The scripture began today with a few verses, that I didn't have us read, but I will share them now: Mark 13:24-27 *"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven."*

Did you have a picture of Santa and Reindeer going through the night sky? And then they'll see Santa enter in grand style, his arrival filling the sky – no one will miss it! He'll dispatch the elves; they will pull those who have been good – 'the chosen' from the four winds, from pole to pole. Isn't that 'The Night Before Christmas story?' Isn't it Santa that we are really watching for this time of year?

...Not knowing the exact hour...keeping a sharp lookout? Who are we really waiting for? In the frenzy of Christmas that has begun, who are you listening to? The voice of the world no longer asks if you are waiting for Santa – the voice assumes that you are. Santa is a given! It doesn't ask "will Santa come?" It tells you "Santa will come." The stores have his hat for you to wear, his reindeer for you to display in all sizes, from countertop displays to life-size blowup of lighted animals to place on your lawn or roof.

You can buy clothes to dress as an elf, or even like Mr. or Mrs. Santa themselves. You can light up your house so Santa won't miss it...will you be ready? Are you naughty or nice? Have you spent all your money yet? Don't stop – the stores need you, and it isn't December 25<sup>th</sup> yet! In the midst of the noise that surrounds us for a commercial Christmas, can you hear a still small voice saying "Prepare ye the way of the Lord?" Jesus says in the scripture today: "Then they will see the Son of Man enter in grand style." Not an 'if' but a definite 'when.' Do we hear that clearly?

*"Said the little lamb to the shepard boy, do you hear what I hear?"* This Christmas song was written in October 1962 with lyrics by Noël Regney and music by Gloria Shayne Baker. The pair were married at the time, and wrote it as a plea for peace during an unsure time. It has sold tens of millions of copies and has been covered by hundreds of artists.

Noel wrote the lyrics for the song, while Gloria composed the Christmas carol's music. This was an unusual arrangement for the two writers. Usually it was Gloria who wrote the lyrics for their songs while Noel composed the music. Noel was inspired to write the lyrics "Said the night wind to the little lamb, 'Do you see what I see?' " and "Pray for peace, people everywhere," after watching babies being pushed in strollers on the sidewalks of New York City.

Gloria stated in an interview years later that neither could personally perform the entire song at the time they wrote it because of their emotions surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis. "Our little song broke us up. You must realize there was a threat of nuclear war at the time." If you hear that song this season, recognize it as an Advent hymn, to help you hear that still small voice of hope in the noise around you.

Stay Awake! In 2008 there was a Super Bowl commercial for Pepsi Max, which was created with an extra boost of caffeine. The commercial was a series of short clips of people doing the head nod. You know the "I need to stay awake, but I just can't, head nod." The commercial was and still is hilarious, with one of the men's face landing in his soup. I have seen a few head nods over the years in worship; not during one of my sermons, of course...It is very humorous, if it isn't your eyes that have blinked closed.

It is an awful feeling when your head nods. It can be painful and embarrassing...It doesn't say 'I'm bored' as much as it says 'I'm too burned out or too tired to care what comes next.' Out of our tiredness comes the dark night of the soul – times of panic, fear and doubts. Those are the times when we especially need hope. We need to surround ourselves with people who inspire us to care for ourselves, keeping us accountable; helping us to acknowledge the fear and to put that fear in perspective within our God Created lives.

To find hope in life, we have to look ahead. We aren't able to know when we will see Christ coming, but we know it will happen – in God's time. We can know that all good comes from God so we can live in anticipated hope of something good. It gives us a reason to watch. It gives us hope for whatever the future will bring. And so we come to Advent...each year, a time to prepare and stay awake for Christ's coming. What will you be watching for this Advent, the coming of Christ or the coming of Santa?

The really good news about Advent is that you don't have to worry about the 'naughty or nice' stuff. Christ already died to cover all of that. You just have to stay awake to accept God's grace, that unconditional love, and live into that grace by turning back to God in all things. Advent means that Jesus already came once and we anticipate the anniversary of what has already happened, but we also look forward to what is yet to come. Living in the already, and the not yet. Jesus is the "Joy of every longing heart."

Only 28 days until Christmas and part of the anticipation is to decorate the house and buy the gifts and send out the Christmas Cards and for our friends and family. There is much to do, but don't nod off. Keep an eye out for the signs of Christ's return...you surely don't want to miss this!